

Rick Strelan
Strange Acts

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Rick Strelan

Strange Acts

Studies in the Cultural World
of the Acts of the Apostles



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To the memory of my father

Peter Gerhard Strelan

On the one hundredth anniversary of his birth

Foreword

There are many people that I wish to thank for their help in the writing and publishing of this book. While it has taken a number of years to complete, the exercise has been most enjoyable, and that is due, to no small degree, to the many people who have patiently walked through Acts with me as I pointed out things I saw there and as they listened to my musings, speculations and guesses. I wish to thank my brothers, the Rev David Strelan and Rev Dr John Strelan in particular. They read and edited drafts of some chapters and made helpful suggestions along the way. My colleague and friend, Professor Michael Latke (The University of Queensland) has always been very encouraging, as have been a number of my other colleagues in the Studies in Religion department of The University of Queensland. The back of the work was broken during an enjoyable three months I spent at Tyndale House in Cambridge, UK in 2001. The library facilities, the friendly administrative staff, and the many encouraging and stimulating scholars who were there at the time all provided the ideal environment in which to lay firm foundations for this book. I thank them all.

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Abbreviations of Periodicals and Reference Works

AB	Anchor Bible
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
ANCL	Ante Nicene Christian Library
ANRW	H. Temporini & W. Haase (eds.), <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung</i> (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1972–).
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BAGD	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich & F. W. Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3 rd edition, 2000)
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
EKK	Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
EPRO	Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
HNT	Handbuch zum Neuen Testament
HTKzNT	Herder's Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBS	<i>Journal of Biblical Studies</i>
JPT	<i>Journal of Pentecostal Theology</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series

<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	H.G. Liddell, R. Scott & H. Stuart Jones, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Oxford: Clarendon, 9 th edition, 1968)
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTD	Das Neue Testament Deutsch
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
ÖTK	Ökumenischer Taschenbuchkommentar
PW	<i>Pauly's Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> . New edition G. Wissowa
RE	<i>Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche</i>
RNT	Regensburger Neues Testament
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBB	Stuttgarter Biblische Beiträge
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTU	Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt
ST	<i>Studia theologica</i>
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
TDNT	G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (trans. G. W. Bromiley; 10 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-).
THKNT	Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TSAJ	Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

Chapter 1

'Tis a Strange World

1. Introduction

Sometimes the obvious needs to be stated: The New Testament is an artefact from a world foreign to anyone living in the twenty-first century. Reading the New Testament is like visiting that foreign world. This book is a running report of some of my visits to parts of the world of Luke and Theophilus, the assumed author and addressee respectively of The Acts of the Apostles. As a visitor to their world, I bring much of my baggage with me, and even when I consciously try to leave it behind as I walk the streets of Acts, I cannot be completely free of my own constructed world. I take it with me, and it becomes a key for interpreting what I see and hear. Even if I visit the world of Acts every day, those visits are really only imaginary. I still live in my own world, converse in my own native language, participate in my own culture, and share in all its constructs.

Even after many such trips into the world of Acts, I still experience a culture shock. It remains a foreign world, and there are many aspects of it that I do not understand. Luke presumably had a constructed world in common with his intended audience, but it is not in common with my world. In the past, when I came across strange things in Acts, I walked past them, noted their strangeness, felt puzzled by them, but then moved on to more familiar territory. So when I read the opening chapter in which Jesus is elevated into the clouds, I never really stopped to examine this act that is so totally strange to anything I have experienced or witnessed. When I continued, and came across a 'holy spirit' and angels, I did some mental gymnastics, often theological in form and style, and went on. When I read about prison doors opening of their own accord, of people dropping dead or being restored to life at the word of an apostle, I thought I was in a world of legend and imagination. These are all acts that are totally foreign to my experience. And when I read of visions, of the demon-possessed, of shadows with healing powers, and of buildings swaying, I knew I was lost and out of my depth.

In my journeys into Acts, I often take guides with me. This report assumes the insights and experiences of people like Haenchen and Barrett, Conzelmann and Fitzmyer, and many others. Very often, these guides did not want to go down the alleyways and unfamiliar streets of Acts, but tended rather to steer me away from those things that they could not perceive as being part of the real world. It was time for me to stop and to openly acknowledge that there are strange things in Acts, and that it does come from a world that is 'other' to mine. It was time for me to look more closely at these things and to try to understand them within their own context. They are there, and they are as much part of Luke's schema as the things with which I am more familiar. I thought I should assume that none of these actions were strange to him or to his audience. They might have been remarkable and surprising to them, but understood, nevertheless.

It is not that I simply have to guess what these strange things mean. Not only can I sit on the shoulders of Acts' scholars and see what they saw, but I also have some local guides. People who shared Luke's world also left behind written texts (and some other artefacts) that give me some clues for interpreting what I read in Acts. The problem is that these guides were not written as guide-books! Like Luke, they assume that the readers know their way around the world of the writers. One obvious indication of this is that they wrote in Greek and Latin.

2. Ancient Literary Styles

Not knowing the language as a native speaker makes visiting the New Testament world difficult. I have been reading and learning *koine* Greek for forty years, but I learnt the basics of the language from books that were not written by native speakers. I have never learned to use Greek in conversation. What was once a living, spoken and shared language has become a book language, a text that I read. There are no living native speakers of *koine* Greek with whom I can check things, and obviously there is no body language that might help me guess what is meant. Guessing at the nuances, the assumptions, the humour, the irony, the shorthand, and the unwritten, makes understanding the New Testament hard work. To complicate matters, it seems that Greek and Roman writers and orators loved to play with words. Cicero, for example, says,

The play upon words wins really vast applause on its own merits ... for the power to divert the force of a word into a sense quite different from that in which other folk understand it, seems to indicate a man of talent (*Orat.* 2.62).

Since this is a study of Acts, and Acts is a text, some further comment on the problems associated with reading such texts is worthwhile. Reading texts, like all things cultural, requires some shared understanding, so I need to try and share in the understanding of texts that Luke and his intended audience presumably shared. To begin with, it might help if I could know what was expected of a good writer in those times.

In his *On Literary Composition*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, writing just before the turn of the Era, gives many examples of what he believes constitutes good Greek oratory and historiography.¹ It is clear that texts were written to be heard, to be read aloud and not only in silence. It is also clear that both oratory and historiography required, in Dionysius's opinion at least, great skill, much practice, and therefore much discipline. Dionysius takes examples from Homer. Now Homer shaped the Greek language and its style in a manner similar to the way Shakespeare and the King James Version of the Bible influenced the English language, and he was still highly regarded at the time Luke was writing.² In fact, Homer was used for a number of purposes. A certain Niceratus said,

My father was anxious to see me develop into a good man, and as a means to this end, he compelled me to memorize all of Homer; and so even now I can repeat the whole *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by heart (Xenophon *Symp.* 3.5).

And the same man said later, 'You know, doubtless, that the sage Homer has written about practically everything pertaining to man' (*Symp.* 4.6).

Dionysius shows from Homer what 'good Greek' is, and there is no doubt much of it is in the sound. 'I am sure everyone will testify that these lines allure and enchant the ear', he says of one passage (*Lit. Comp.* 3). Writing well has to do with rhythm, melody, metre, word order, word arrangement, word selection, length of vowels, the sounds of consonants, and more. As Dionysius says,

The most elegant writers of poetry and prose have understood these facts well, and both arrange their words by weaving them together with deliberate care, and with elaborate artistic skill adapt the syllables and the letters to the emotions which they wish to portray (*Lit. Comp.* 15).

¹ Similar opinions are expressed in his essays, 'On The Style of Demosthenes' and 'On Thucydides'.

² Note the high opinion held of Homer by Dio Chrysostom in his *Discourse* 53. It was an opinion also held by Latin writers (for example, Velleius Paterculus, *Hist.* 1.5).

So refined is the art that an author will or will not use the final letter in ἐποίησεν or will prefer λελύσεται to λυθήσεται, because 'that author is altering the forms of his words in order to fit them together more beautifully and to better purpose' (*Lit. Comp.* 6). This was a concern also of Latin writers. Cicero said the following on the pronunciation of certain words,

Consult the rules of grammar and they will censure your usage; refer the matter to your ears and they will approve. Ask why it is so; they will say that it pleases them. And language ought to gratify the pleasure of the ear (*Orator* 159).

Another example comes from Aulus Gellius, who constantly comments on such things. When discussing whether one should say *has urbis* or *has urbes*, and *hanc turrem* or *hanc turrim*, Gellius quotes Valerius Probus,

If you are either composing verse or writing prose and have to use these words, pay no attention to the musty, fusty rules of the grammarians, but consult your own ear as to what is to be said in any given place. What it favours will surely be the best.

He goes on to discuss examples from Virgil, Cicero and others who used the same words with different spellings from time to time in order to please the ear. They could use the feminine form of a noun when the grammarians insisted on the masculine, simply because it sounded better (*Att. Nights* 13.21).

Dionysius makes similar points in his discussion of Herodotus and Thucydides as historians. In his opinion, what makes Herodotus the better historian is his style as much as the content. To illustrate once again the importance of the impact on the ear, this is Dionysius's comment on a passage from Herodotus, 'The story has been told with great dexterity, and he has made the incident better to hear described than to see done' (*Lit. Comp.* 3). This attitude is related to what writers thought good historiography was. It is clear that they are not as interested in reporting factual details as they are in the purpose and motivation for actions. Aulus Gellius quotes Asellio as saying that the mere chronicling of events is to 'tell stories to children, not to write history' (*id fabulas pueris est narrare, non historias scribere*, *Att. Nights* 5.18.9).

The Greek of the New Testament is not the classical Greek that Dionysius preferred. There were a number of Greek and Latin writers living around the time of Luke, who bemoaned the decline in oratory standards and who tried to revive the classic style. Tacitus, writing as a close contemporary of

Luke, in his *Dialogue on Oratory*, has characters debate whether contemporary oratory is as good as classical. One speaker, Aper, defends the more recent orators from Cicero to his own time, and then concludes,

My own view is that the orator, like a prosperous and well-founded householder, ought to live in a house that is not only wind and weather proof, but pleasing also to the eye; he should not only have furnishings as shall suffice for his essential needs, but also number among his belongings both gold and precious stones, so as to make people want to take him up again and again, and gaze with admiration (*Dial. Orat.* 22).

Dionysius and Tacitus and their friends obviously had a longing for 'the good old days', and they might have been quite elitist about it all. But to be fair to Dionysius, he does say at the end of his discussion on Thucydides that

history should not be written in an arid, unadorned and commonplace style: it should contain an element of artistry; and yet it should not be entirely artificial, but should be just a step removed from everyday language. Excess is an abomination even in quite pleasant things, whereas moderation is everywhere desirable (*Thuc.* 51).

Most, if not all, of the New Testament writers, either deliberately chose to write not in the classic style but in a popular style, or they were not formally trained in the Greek oratorical and historiographical style that Dionysius and Tacitus preferred. For all that, they wrote primarily for a hearing audience, and that is generally foreign to my way of writing and receiving a written text. And if there is one writer in the New Testament who comes at all close to following a certain Greek historiographical style, showing the moderate style that Dionysius might have approved, it is Luke in his Acts of the Apostles. But, as Plümacher has shown, Luke does not fit the model of historian as represented by Polybius and Thucydides; rather, he resembles those who wrote their histories according to the mimetic or sensationalistic style or genre.³ Understanding Luke's writing style gives me a better chance of understanding his book. Whatever other aims Luke might have had in writing, he obviously wrote to convince his audience. To write to convince is a skill, and I believe that Luke demonstrates quite some skill. He selects his vocabulary deliberately, wasting very few words in what today we

³ E. Plümacher, 'TERATEIA: Fiktion und Wunder in der hellenistisch-römischen Geschichtsschreibung und in der Apostelgeschichte', ZNW 89 (1998), pp. 66–90.

might call 'padding'. This matter of deliberate style will be an important element in the way I read a number of episodes in Acts.

There is one ancient literary text that influenced Luke more than any other, namely, the Greek Scriptures. Their importance for understanding Acts cannot be overstated. They were for many early Christian writers something like what Homer was for others. Both Homer and the Scriptures were steeped in myth, in telling the experiences of heroes, in portraying close relations between the gods and humans. For many Greeks, as for many Jews, the remembering of history was not linear; it was not simply the recall of something from the distant past. Instead, telling and retelling the story brought the power and experiences of the past into the present. My interpretation of so many of the strange episodes in Acts will be based largely on what I believe is Luke's reading of the Greek Scriptures. He believed that the god who had acted in the lives of the heroes of Israel's past, was acting again in a similar way in the lives of the new heroes of Israel. And Luke's reading of these Greek writings was in turn influenced by other texts in his cultural world. In that sense, Luke is like Philo, who is a good example of a Jew viewing the Scriptures through his own contemporary cultural glasses. Luke also wore culturally-designed glasses when he read his Greek Scriptures.

Of the other texts that have come down through the centuries – whether they are written (books, letters, inscriptions) or material (buildings, constructions, coins, statues, images) – many are leftovers, and most are ruined. The original context of many of them has been lost. In the case of the written texts, the vast majority of them have survived because Christians preserved them. And Christians, understandably, were selective, being more interested in some writings than in others. Another fact is that what have been left are the 'texts' of the few – the rich, the educated, the upper class and the privileged. The written texts are, most likely, those of adult males. On the other hand, historians did write for a popular audience, orators were public speakers, inscriptions and images and statues were publicly visible, traders and merchants, craft-workers and farm-workers all dealt with coins. So we can cautiously assume that what has survived in a general way reflects the views and the experiences of the majority of the populace. For all that, as Lohfink says,

We should never forget that we know basically very little about the folk-religion of antiquity. In what has come down to us in the literature we have the only evidence of a relatively small and exclusive circle (1971: 50, translation mine).

There are those who argue that we are not so far removed from the world of the New Testament that we cannot understand it. That is true to a point. Scholars do not just make blind guesses! Downing (2000) is one who would say that things are not significantly different between then and now. However, we certainly cannot *assume* that things are the same. In fact, the basic assumption ought to be that these texts come from a world that is 'other', and that otherness ought to be taken seriously and for itself. Basic things like space, time, gender, colour, and classifications and taxonomies in general, vary considerably between cultures, and so does the understanding of complex things like human emotions and the composition of the human being. We cannot assume, for example, that 'heaven', 'joy', 'soul', 'white', and 'God' have the same referents in both the New Testament world and in my world of the twenty-first century.

If I may use another analogy, I am like an anthropologist who can only observe as an outsider. While modern cultural or social anthropologists might be 'participant observers', even they are still observers. Observers of the New Testament world cannot participate in that world at all. The writers can not be asked, 'What did you mean?' Nor can the first century audience be asked what their reactions and responses were to these writings. And even if we could do that, we would have to do so through the medium of a language that is not ours and that carries with it the grids imposed on it by our own language. Nor can we be sure that we are even asking the right questions! The whole endeavour is very much as Geertz typically wrote, 'The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong' (1979: 222). The best that one can do, according to Geertz, is to interpret the wink, to get the joke. 'The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they're up to' (1979: 58).

One of Plutarch's dinner-companions once said,

In general, the man who demands to see the logic of each and every thing destroys the wonder in all things. Whenever the logical explanation for anything eludes us, we begin to be puzzled, and therefore to be philosophers (*Table Talk*, 680C–D).

I do not want to destroy the wonder, and I enjoy being puzzled. To go back to my opening analogy, I want to stop just looking at these strange things in Acts from a safe distance. I want to get off the main street and poke around down the alleys and back streets. I want to try to join in whatever game it is Luke and Theophilus think they are playing, even if only from the very

fringes. I am trying to learn the rules, trying to 'be in on the joke'. I am willing to be puzzled and for western and modern logic to fly out the window. In the end, it is not answers I am looking for; I am hoping to contribute to the discussion.

My primary aim, then, is to look closely at the stories in Acts that sound strange to me, and to try to read them within the socially and culturally constructed southern Mediterranean world of the first century. I realise that as much as I might want to, it is not possible for me to hear these things as Theophilus heard them. But I can construct his world to a degree. Theophilus probably was a man of some status. Luke, in his Gospel, calls him *κράτιστε* (Lk. 1.3), an adjective also used in Acts, but only of Felix and Festus, Romans governors (Acts 24.3; 26.25). He was, presumably, a man of some education, a man whose ears were familiar with the Greek Jewish Scriptures, and a man who knew the claims made about the god of Israel. He lived and participated in a world permeated by Hellenistic thought and culture. Most significantly of all, he was a man who already knew (and probably believed) the Christian claims that in the mighty words and deeds of Jesus, the god of Israel had acted for the salvation not only of Israel but also of all nations. In other words, he knew Luke's Gospel. So how did this man hear Acts? I assume, for example, that he was able to make good sense of the idea of Jesus ascending into heaven, and he could do that because he drew on his worldview, a view shaped in part by 'texts' that he had read and heard.

I acknowledge from the outset that there will be the risk of overstatement, of making more of these 'strange' acts than should really be made. When I go on a holiday into another country, I often photograph the strange things, the things that are out of the ordinary. However, it could be quite misleading to show those photos to my friends as though they were representative or typical of the country and culture I visited. The same is also possible when I deal with the strange things in Acts. I do not want to give the impression that these things are at the core of Acts, and that if they are not understood, Acts is not understood. I do not insist that they are the main interest and concern of Luke. In a number of cases, they obviously are not. But they are significant and important nevertheless. For Luke, nearly all of the things I consider strange give legitimacy and validation to the apostles, their message, and their mission. They indicate to the audience that the central characters are men of God doing the work of God. To put it another way, Luke wants to prove Gamaliel's hunch right. What these men do is the work of God, and no human plan or device can stop them from achieving what it is that God, through his Spirit, wills (Acts 5.38–39). These strange acts may not be central, but nor are they peripheral, and they certainly deserve close scrutiny.

3. The strange acts and scholarship

In general, New Testament scholars have shown scant interest in things like angels, dreams, visions and supranormal experiences. Having been driven for over a hundred years by a scientific method that ruled out the supernatural *a priori*, few academics would put their credibility and academic acceptability on the line by publishing on this material. If they did publish on it, it was to debunk it as historically unreliable or as illustrative of precritical thought. But in the current generation, the importance and significance of 'spiritual' experience is obvious. Enchantment, the world of magic and of the extraordinary are acceptably fascinating, as is demonstrated by the success of such books and movies as *Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter*. Institutions, with their rules and regulations and limitations on what can be thought, believed or practised, have given way to the validity of the individual's own experience. This is true also in the area of religion in the West. Churches, as institutions, no longer have authority in the lives of many people, who now rely more on their own 'spiritual' experiences in their search for meaning and purpose. At an academic level, there has also been a slight shift away from the traditional scientific world-view that ruled out the action of spirit-beings in the world and dismissed the validity of any experience that could not be scientifically verifiable. Instead, there is now some room for the view that takes such experiences, especially religious or spiritual ones, more seriously and as having some credibility. However, even when they are taken seriously, they are still examined through scientific glasses. Visions, for example, are explained in neurophysiological or psychological terms. Some biblical scholars encourage a move away from such traditional scientific bases. So Pilch says, 'Scholars who deny that "supernatural" experiences can occur in "natural" human experience demonstrate Western cultural myopia rather than scientific astuteness' (1995: 49). And Dunn, arguing on the basis that 'the core of religion is religious experience', has challenged biblical scholarship to be consistent with what it has always been known, namely, that experience was at the very heart of the early Christian movement. Jesus, Paul, and Peter, for example, had religious experiences, and those experiences need to be examined and critiqued seriously (1997: 1).

In the past, scholarly interest in Acts has focused sharply on four closely related issues. The first of these are the sources used by Luke in constructing his narrative. This has been central for a long time, particularly in German scholarship. Closely related to that concern has been, secondly, the debate over the historical reliability of Acts, especially in its portrayal of Paul *vis à vis* his own writings, but also generally in its depiction of the

earliest Christian preaching, teaching, experiences and practices. The third focus has been on the genre of Acts. If it is a history, how does it compare with ancient historiography? If it is not history, then what is it? Is it a novel written for entertainment? Related to genre is the discussion on the purpose of the book. Is it apologetic, evangelistic, catechetical, or what? More recently, the tendency is to see its purpose as part of the double work, Luke-Acts. A fourth focus has been on the theology of Acts, especially on the relation between Jew and Gentile, and on its 'salvation-history'.

Typical of these concerns is the recent work by Stefan Schreiber, *Paulus als Wundertäter* (1996). Schreiber's interests are in the depiction of Paul, not in the *Wunder* themselves. He, like many others, wants to understand the relation between the wonder-working Paul of Acts and the seemingly power-less Paul of the letters. His approach to the *Wunder* passages in Acts is redaction-critical, being interested in the traditions that Luke used and in the ancient parallels. He is not curious, as I am, about how the *Wunder* were understood by an ancient audience. Schreiber wants to emphasise that often in Acts Paul is not a Wundertäter or a θεῖος ἄνθρωπος because '[d]er eigentliche Wundertäter ist also Gott' (1996: 99). I agree with Schreiber, and others, that the signs and wonders in Acts serve to legitimize the gospel, to link Paul with Peter and Jesus and Moses and Elijah in salvation history, and to show that Paul has the protection and favour of God.

Scholarship that has wanted to anchor Acts in its Greco-Roman setting has also largely done so with similar foci. For all that, it is strange that the miracles, or the other unusual events narrated in Acts, receive so little coverage in that scholarship. The five volumes on the setting of Acts in the Greco-Roman world⁴ has not one article dealing with miracles or the extraordinary, or even with such experiences as dreams and visions. Similarly, the recent *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (1998) does not touch the subject. Hemer's *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (1989), which follows a line similar to that taken much earlier by William Ramsay, has the agenda of defending the reliability of Acts. But here too there is no chapter dealing with the miraculous, although the subject is dealt with in an appendix. John Squires' book, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*,⁵ provides a useful chapter on the role of portents and epiphanies in Hellenistic historiography,

⁴ For example, B. W. Winter and A. D. Clarke (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its ancient literary setting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993); and, D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman setting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁵ J. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (SNTSMS 76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

but makes only general comments on their role in Luke-Acts, and offers no close study of any one miracle episode or epiphany experience in Acts. He draws attention to them to demonstrate Luke's interest in 'God's ongoing guidance of human history' (1993: 101).

Where most interest has been shown in the miracles in Acts is in the history-of-religion approach that interpreted such phenomena in parallel with similar events and actions recorded in the pagan literature. Miracles were often seen as indications that the apostles fit the Hellenistic idea of the divine man (θεῖος ἄνθρωπος). This interest has divided scholarship in Acts, with German scholars predominantly feeling comfortable with the notion of Peter and Paul as 'divine men', while English-American scholars generally have rejected it. In the English-speaking world, the work of Holladay,⁶ for example, claims that to make Luke's heroes into such men is anachronistic. This is in response and reaction to the claims of Bieler⁷ in particular, but also of other recent scholars, such as Kollmann,⁸ who would still want to speak of Jesus, Paul and Peter in these terms.

There is some truth in the criticism that some scholars adopted the history-of-religion approach in order to downplay any suggestion that the New Testament miracles were unique. But scholars wanting to counter-balance this approach – especially those in a British context – have also been driven by an agenda. They want to rescue the miracles as part of God's plan and history. For example, Lampe argues that the miracles in Acts are 'not external to God's work of salvation and judgment', and are much more like the miracles of Moses, Elijah, and other Jewish prophets than those of the Hellenistic wonder-workers (1965: 166). Lampe shows that he wants to maintain the uniqueness and superiority of the miracles in the canonical Gospels and Acts by distinguishing those miracles from the ones found in later Christian apocryphal Acts which he labels 'tiresome' (1965: 165).

Very often, Paul is at the centre of these debates. Jacob Jervell has reacted to the claims that began with Bruno Bauer in 1850 that Paul in Acts is a wonder-working, triumphant, magician. Jervell believes that the *Wundergeschichte* from Acts could be omitted without making a noticeable difference to the theological ingredients (1979: 57). He argues that if we

⁶ C. R. Holladay, *Theios aner in Hellenistic-Judaism: a critique of the use of this category in New Testament Christology* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977).

⁷ L. Bieler, *Theios aner: Das Bild des 'Göttlichen Menschen' in Spätantike und Frühchristentum* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967).

⁸ B. Kollmann, *Jesus und die Christen als Wundertäter: Studien zu Magie, Medizin und Schamanismus in Antike und Christentum* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

want to see the real Paul of Acts, we should look at his speeches, where we would notice that there is no mention of his wonder-working powers. In addition, such powers are not given or promised to him in the narrative of his conversion. Jervell claims that Luke never narrates the *Wunder* for their own sake, but that they always play a lesser role in the episode. For example, in the prison episode in Acts 16, the miraculous escape is not the point; rather, the issue is that of Paul's Roman citizenship and of the conversion of the gaoler (1979: 63). Jervell (and there are others who agree) argues that Paul is portrayed in Acts as threatened, persecuted, and mistreated – a theme, he thinks, that runs like a red thread through the narratives. So Paul is a suffering Paul, and whatever wonders are associated with him in no way diminish or soften that fact (1979: 63). For Jervell, then, this rules Paul out as a divine man because such figures in ancient literature did not suffer as Paul does (1979: 64).

One might debate Jervell's claims. At this point, I simply draw attention to the way scholars have reacted to the *Wunderement* in Acts, and to show that it is common – for a variety of reasons – to downplay its significance. Sometimes, such efforts are theologically driven; sometimes they are driven by the wish to maintain a harmony between Acts and Paul's writings, or to soften the sharp divide that many scholars in the Baur tradition have often made. Whatever the agenda, the fact is that,

[p]rimitive Christian miracle stories testify to a revelation of the holy, to its power to break into the normal course of the world. That is their only message. A large part of exegetical labour expended on them, however, is devoted to denying or minimising this (Theissen 1983: 291).

Delling (1970) said similar things. He highlighted three basic responses in traditional New Testament scholarship. The first dismisses the miraculous as legends told with some religious motive; the second tries to find natural explanations for what are unusual events; and the third treats them as special, inexplicable phenomena (1970: 53). Since Delling, some narrative critics like Witherington and Pervo see the miraculous and wonderful as keeping Luke out of the category of historian. Instead, Luke writes a novel in which the miraculous adds to the entertainment value. So Pervo claims that 'Luke's congeries of miracles ... and constant improbabilities exceeded even the most permissive limits (of ancient historiography)' (1987: 3). Another example of removing the miraculous from the historical is seen in Plümacher. He argues that Luke fits the 'mimetic historian' label by ancient standards, and calls the awakenings of the dead in Acts 9.36–42 and 20.7–12,

'crude miracles' that have almost no parallel in ancient historiography and find parallel only in mythology (1998: 84).

I noted earlier that Jervell wants to subordinate the miraculous in Acts to other more central themes. Typical of this approach is to make the powerful actions of the apostles secondary to the power of 'the word of the Lord' proclaimed by the apostles. Once again, I sense that the powerful actions are belittled and marginalised. Recently, Klauck, for example, sees rightly that many times in Acts there is a confrontation of powers. But he says that each time 'it is the Christian proclamation that wins the trial of strength, relying not so much on a superior miraculous power, but rather on the message of salvation which it brings' (2000: 54). That is true, but the fact is that first of all there is a display of power that is superior. The power of the Christian god is made to look greater than that of others. This needs to be taken seriously, which is largely the intention of this book. Theologically, it might be correct that the real power is in 'the word', but Luke does not always fit so neatly into our theological frameworks.

Recently, some scholars have claimed to take some of these strange acts seriously by interpreting them along psychological and anthropological lines. So, for example, there is some interest in portraying Paul as a shaman, and the visions of the apostles as experiences that happened while they were in an altered state of consciousness. John Ashton, in his *The Religion of Paul the Apostle* (2000), believes that theology and science have dominated for too long, and the comparative approach needs a better hearing. So he compares Paul with shamans and with modern charismatic figures like Oral Roberts. He thinks we understand Paul better if we look at his charismatic and spiritual experiences. John Pilch sees Felicitas Goodman's work on modern non-western shamans as a key to understanding the strange experiences reported in Acts and elsewhere. I agree with the basic emphasis that the 'strange experiences' need to be taken more seriously and to be seen as more central in our understanding of Paul. But I have a problem with the assumption that it is helpful to compare the experiences of Paul and his contemporaries with those of a shaman of Siberia, Japan, Korea or elsewhere in modern times. Despite claims to the contrary, little in the work of Ashton and Pilch is based on Paul and his contemporaries and *their* understanding of their own experiences. Modern parallels are interesting, but the cultural context of the visionary cannot be ignored, and the context of Paul is significantly different from the context of a Siberian or of an Asian, let alone of a North American white televangelist.

In summary, it is fair to say that scholarship has tended to find the strange stories in Acts an embarrassment. As Theissen concludes,

The ancient church's pride in the miracles has turned into its opposite. A 'philological cultural Protestantism' finds them too primitive; hermeneutical profundity suspends them, 'explains' them and buries them with praise. Orthodox insistence on their factual reality has been as little able to prevent this as the apodictic simplicity of fundamentalists ... The miracle stories are alien visitors in our world (1983: 299–300).

I agree generally with Hemer, even if for different reasons, that

miracle is integral to Luke's God-centred world and significant within it ... It is an inseparable part of his concept of what happened, and we must cope with the difficulties which this factor poses for the modern mind (1989: 85).

4. The strange god of the Christians

Luke belonged to a minority grouping within his society. The vast majority of people in his social and cultural world did not think that his god played a significant role, indeed any role at all, in their society or in the wider world. Many rarely thought much about the universal role of the gods. Luke's god was not a major god in any city. There were no processions or festivals for him, no public myths sung about him, no sacrifices to him on behalf of the citizens; there were no temples, no images and no sacred groves. Among the pagans, then, who were the vast majority in the Roman world, Luke's god was either unknown or ignored. Acts is better understood as reflecting the perspective of a stranger and foreigner, rather than that of an insider sharing comfortably with fellow citizens in the life of his society.

The introduction of strange gods into a community was often regarded with suspicion, and their associated religious practices and ideas were seen as threatening. Cicero, in the century before Luke, agreed with the law, 'Let no one have gods on his own or new or foreign gods unless they have been sanctioned by the whole community' (*Laws* 2.19). Dio Cassius reports Agrippa as saying, after expelling 'astrologers and sorcerers' in 33BCE,

You should hate and punish those who introduce foreign elements into our religion ... because men of this sort, by importing new powers, persuade many people to take up foreign customs, and from this are born conspiracies and gatherings and secret clubs, which are the last thing a monarchy needs. Do not, then, permit people to be atheists or sorcerers (52.36.1–2).

Valerius Maximus, a closer contemporary of Luke, gives a small clue as to how difficult it could sometimes be for a foreign cult to gain an honourable

reputation in a place like Rome. He tells of a Roman magistrate who put on the garb of an Isis priest and went begging through the streets and high-ways in order to trick his way into Brutus's camp (*Memorab.* 7.3). Valerius then comments that it is 'a pitiful necessity indeed that bade a magistrate of the Roman people throw aside his glory of office and walk through the city disguised by the emblems of a foreign cult' (7.3.8).

Dionysius of Halicarnassus admired the Romans because they did not allow just any cult into Rome. He says that they have the highest respect for the gods, and you will not see 'any ecstatic transports (θεοφορήσεις), no Corybantic frenzies, no begging under the colour of religion, no bacchanals or secret mysteries, no all-night vigils of men and women together in the temples'. He goes on to say that, despite the influx of innumerable nations into Rome with the accompanying cults, 'the city has never officially adopted any of these foreign practices'. But if oracles have so decreed that some foreign practices be taken into Rome, it has been in accordance with their own traditions 'after banishing all fabulous clap-trap'. In the Idean rites, for example, the praetors perform the sacrifices and celebrate games in honour of the goddess, but the priests and priestesses are Phrygian, and they are the ones who carry the image through the streets and do things the Phrygians do. He continues admiringly,

But by a law and decree of the senate no native Roman walks in procession through the city arrayed in a parti-colored robe, begging alms, or escorted by flute players, or worships the goddess with Phrygian ceremonies. So cautious are they about admitting any foreign religious customs and so great their aversion to all pompous display that is wanting in decorum (*Ant. Rom.* 2.19.2-4).

The Christian movement, like many others that were foreign, was regarded with suspicion. Christians were 'hated for their abominations' (Tacitus *Ann.* 15.44). Being foreign, the movement was threatening to the status quo. Having its origins in the east meant it was likely to be regarded like all other religious movements that came from that direction. As far as many Romans, and even some Greeks, were concerned, things eastern were extravagant, exotic, effeminate, and dangerous.

On the other hand, Luke's talk of a god who acted directly in human affairs, and who offered a 'holy' life-style, might have struck an appreciative chord with those Greeks and Romans who were quite pessimistic about their society and the role of their gods in it. Sallust is one who thought that in his time (first century BCE) Rome was in some kind of moral and political decay, and that the gods were distant and inactive. The way the god-fearing and pious ancestors had governed was great and noble, but by

Sallust's time, things had become dishonourable and vicious (*Bell. Cat.* 5.9). Rome had changed and was riddled with the disease of vice and greed (10.6). Sallust, and many others, believed that the traditional gods were absent and ineffective, and 'beyond question Fortune holds sway everywhere' (8.1). Catullus, his contemporary, also complained that in the days 'before religion was despised, the heavenly ones were wont to visit pious homes of heroes, and show themselves to mortal company', but do so no longer due to the crimes and sins of the earth (*Poems* LXIV 384–408).

Within the Jewish synagogue circles in which they first moved, some Christians were probably regarded as odd-bods and hotheads, and there is little doubt that some Christians saw themselves, and were regarded by others, as a sect. Luke refers to the Christians as The Way (Acts 9.2), and that very terminology is typically sectarian. Some Christians believed that Jesus had brought in the end of the age and that they had been chosen by God to prepare the way of the Lord. As also happens now, such a group was marginalised.

In general, wherever Paul went in Acts, he was treated as a foreigner, despite his claims to Roman citizenship. He came to places like Lystra and Derbe and Philippi as an outsider. That put him under suspicion as he went around hawking new religious ideas that potentially were threatening to the cities and their structures, especially to their religious customs. The episode of Paul in Ephesus in Acts 19 is a good illustration of how potentially damaging the Christian message was seen to be (even if only by Luke) to the religious, social, political and economic status quo of the city. Acts might be 'the most exciting book in the New Testament' (Dunn 1996: ix), but for all the excitement, the heroes are portrayed primarily as rejects, at both a political and social level. They are rejected by sanhedrins, synagogues and gentile courts. Kings and magistrates think them mad. The point is that God is on their side and does not abandon them. In fact, God rescues them from dangerous situations created by their opponents.

When discussing Luke's world, there is the important question of terminology. It is very common to use two terms to describe the culture of Luke's world. The one is 'Hellenistic', and the other 'Greco-Roman'. Neither term is really satisfactory. What complicates the issue is the relationship of the term 'Jewish' to both. The distinction between being Hellenistic and being Jewish is not at all helpful or even accurate, but it is commonly and persistently made without explanation or justification. For example, recently, Tilborg & Counet write,

We can accept that its (sc. the text's) reception community lived in the Hellenistic world. Obviously, I do not exclude the fact that Luke was also read

by 'Jewish' readers or from a Jewish context. But quantitatively this was a waning minority of readers in comparison to the growing majority of non-Jewish, Hellenistic readers (2000: 198).

This explicitly equates 'Hellenistic' with 'non-Jewish'. But very few diaspora Jews were not culturally Hellenistic. In other words, most Jews spoke Greek, and probably wore their hair like their neighbours, dressed like them, enjoyed the same music, traded, bought and sold like them. What made most Jews distinctive, if anything, was their observance of sabbath, their dietary laws, their practice of circumcision, and their 'monotheism'. However, even these essential aspects of 'being Jewish' were not as distinctive or as strictly observed as is often claimed.

Is 'Greco-Roman' a better term? The problem is that it is so broad that it has little meaning. After all, there were clear cultural distinctions between Greeks and Romans, let alone differences within those two groups. Acts was written in the Greek language, but the author lived under Roman administrative control. The Romans certainly did not abandon Latin, especially when it came to official and legal matters and when Rome wanted people to know just who it was that was in control. Coinage and inscriptions offer clear proof of this. It might be better to talk simply of 'Greeks and Romans' in the same way as did near contemporaries of Luke, such as Valerius Maximus (writing in Latin) and Plutarch (writing in Greek).

Finally on this matter, I have no doubt that Luke, in particular among the early Christian writers, wrote in the tradition of Jewish sacred scriptures, and that many of the 'strange acts' in his book can be understood better if seen in that tradition. But as I have already indicated, Luke also lived in a hellenised world where Homer and Virgil, for example, were dominant and very influential literary figures. I cannot agree with Lane Fox that 'Homer ... was unknown territory to the first Christians' (1986: 377). They may not refer explicitly to his writings, but that does not mean they were unaware of the world of Homer and of Greek mythology and so on. Philo, a Jewish near contemporary of Luke, regarded Homer and Hesiod as educators:

If we are justified in listening to the poets – and why should we not, since they are our educators through all our days, and as parents in private life teach wisdom to their children, so do they in public life to their cities (*Prov.* 1.143).

Philo believed that Homer was 'the greatest and most reputed of poets' (*Conf.* 4) and that 'we should make it our aim to read the writings of the sages' (*Sacr.* 79). Anyone who wishes to be a lover of wisdom, he says, must

have an 'acquaintance with the poets and learning of ancient history' (*Somn.* 1.205). If Luke thought in any way like Philo, then there is little doubt that he too held the 'poets and the historians' in some regard; and even less doubt that many in Luke's audience were very familiar with them.

There is also a case for arguing that the Jewish sacred scriptures themselves have more in common with the Homeric and Greek tradition than is often assumed. As Lane Fox himself acknowledges, 'The Greek translators of the Old Testament sometimes used language and details which went beyond the Hebrew and increased the similarity' with the Greek literary traditions (1986: 377). So in this matter, too, the distinction between what is Jewish and what is Greek and/or Roman is not an easy one to make. Luke knew the poets, for example (Acts 17.28). In any case, it would have been impossible for any Jew or Christian to live in a hellenised *polis* without seeing or hearing the processions, the dramas, the theatres, the courts, the gossip, and the debates.

5. Some Greek and Roman attitudes towards the miraculous⁹

One of the most significant differences between the world of Luke and that in which I live is the way gods and humans relate. In fact, for very many people of my generation, that is not even a question that any serious scientist can handle. The worldview is that what happens does so not because of any divine power controlling, directing, and influencing things, but by random chance; things just 'turn out' a certain way, possibly by some cause-and-effect chain or pattern. God, if such a being exists at all, is above and outside this world, and might occasionally 'break into' this world. For Luke, and for many others – but not all – of his generation, heaven was much closer, and the boundaries between the human and the divine were far more tenuous. There was little sense of his god 'breaking in', because the gods were already inside the cosmos, not external to it. It was common to think that the whole world was 'the abode of the gods' (Cicero *Repub.* 3.19.14). Cato says, 'God has his dwelling in all things that be, in earth and air and sea and starry vault, in virtuous deeds; in all that thou canst see, in all thy thoughts contained' (Lucan 9.675–677). It was a view similar to that of Philo, who believed 'the real temple of God to be the world in its totality' (*Spec. Leg.* 1.66). In addition, the gods were powers, and so almost any unexpected or awesome manifestation of power was thought to be divine.

⁹ See especially, Plümacher (1998).

What I today might call a psychological force or a natural force was then thought to be divine. A person might even be possessed by a divine power, and if a person displayed power of any kind then it would be asked whether that person was divine.

My monotheistic views tend to separate and distinguish sharply between the gods and their roles or functions. I learn that Athena is the god of war, that Demeter is the god of corn and harvest, and Aphrodite the goddess of love. But for the Greeks and Romans, one god cannot be seen in isolation from the others. As Vernant writes,

A divine power does not really have any existence on its own. It exists only by virtue of the network of relations that makes it a part of the divine systems as a whole (1983: 329).

Peoples in various Mediterranean and oriental cultures, with their various traditions over many centuries, have known of strange, often powerful, acts performed by strange men and women. Long before Jesus came onto the scene, Greeks knew of Melampas and Abaris, Epimenides and Aristaeas, Pythagoras and Empedocles. These were men who were reputed to be able to send their souls on journeys, determine the will of the gods, have power over animals, control winds and waves, transport themselves over great distances in an instant, banish evil demons, cure the sick, or raise the dead. They were generally men of great power, and it was claimed that 'no great man ever existed who did not enjoy some portion of divine inspiration' (Cicero *Nat. Deorum* 2.66.167). And Jews likewise had traditions of powerful men like Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, Solomon and Daniel. They were known as men of great wisdom that included the knowledge of the heavenly world because they themselves had visited that realm, or because, like their Greek and Roman counterparts, they were gifted by a divine or holy spirit. Many of them also possessed a great power which enabled them to raise the dead, float axe-heads on water, part waters, interpret dreams, know the secrets of the magical arts, and so on. Their power and wisdom was said to be superior to that of similar people in their wider world.

In Luke's world, it was common for such people to be regarded as divine because of the strange and wonderful powers they possessed, or better, that possessed them. As already noted, scholarship has debated whether or not it is valid to call them 'divine men'. So much, of course, depends on definition. Speyer defines a divine man as 'any person whom the holy power, the deity, has chosen and gifted with his power, so that he, like the god, can decree blessing and curse, health and sickness, life and

death' (1989: 376). While there is little doubt that it is anachronistic to use the technical term *θεῖος ἀνὴρ* of any of the apostles in the New Testament or of Jesus himself, there is also little doubt that many, if not all, of these men fit Speyer's definition. I think too that this definition fits well the way the adjective *θεῖος* is used by Josephus, who calls Isaiah a 'divine prophet' (*ὁ προφήτης θεῖος*, *Ant.* 10.35), an expression also used by Philo of Moses (*Vit. Mos.* 2.188). Among other Greek writers, Galen later calls Hippocrates *ὁ θεϊότατος Ἱπποκράτης* (*Nat. Fac.* 3.13). The Latin author, Columella, calls Plato *divinus auctor* (3.22.4). It is clear in all cases that the men are not thought to be gods but to have abilities and powers that come from the gods or are characteristic of the gods. Very often when the term 'divine' is used in this book, it is used in that sense. A person was divine if he or she had status, power, or a spirit that came from the gods and was consistent with that of those who belong to the world of the gods.

For Jews who knew the Scriptures of their tradition, the strange acts performed by the apostles would have rung quite loud bells. 'Signs and wonders' were the hallmark of the time of Moses especially. The Pentateuch concludes,

And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and wonders (LXX τοῖς σημεῖοις καὶ τέρασιν) which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great and terrible deeds which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel (Deut. 34.10–12).

But the same book also holds the promise that God will raise up a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18.18), a promise that the Christian writers like Luke latched on to for their understanding of Jesus and of Peter and Paul. There was something cyclical in Jewish thought about the creative saving acts of God, and there was also something eschatological. There would be 'the day of the Lord', and 'in that day' God would act finally to bring salvation to his people. So, Jewish audiences of Acts knew of the power of God working through Moses and Elijah. They knew of inspired prophets and prophetesses. They had stories of heroes through whom God created Israel and who set examples of how Jews ought to live when under foreign control and when away from the land of Israel. They knew what their god was capable of doing and what he had promised to do. These myths and traditions were at the very heart of Jewish identity and faith, and the connection between myth and history for most Jews was very close indeed. Once again, we cannot assume that people of the past thought in much the same way as we

do. For them, myth and history were both essential, complementary ways of expressing truth. There is little doubt that much of Acts draws heavily on the myth-traditions of Israel, and that many of the strange acts lose some of their strangeness when understood in the context of those traditions.

The first century CE philosopher, Seneca, believed that 'to learn what the stuff of the universe is, who its author or custodian is, what god is' is what life is all about. He wrote, 'If I had not been admitted to these studies it would not have been worthwhile to have been born' (*Nat. Quaest.* Pref. 1.3). Valerius Maximus also expresses the fascination many had for 'the rich and powerful kingdom' of nature (dives et praepotens Naturae regnum, *Memorab.* 2. praef.). Ovid, Livy, Cicero, Pliny, Aelian, Aulus Gellius and other contemporary Latin and Greek writers all show a fascination with the strange events and experiences that have been told to them or that they know for themselves. Quintilian says in the first century CE, 'Who, and country-folk are no exception, does not make some inquiry into the causes of natural phenomena?' (*Inst.* 1 Pref. 16). An integrated cosmos (which carried a sense of harmony and pattern) was basic in much of the thinking at the time. Heaven, earth, the gods, humans, animals, the elements all were seen as operating and relating to each other within this universe.

So it is understandable that strange events in nature were interpreted as signs or omens from the gods. Many read the natural world as the writing pad of the gods. For example, Dio Cassius reports that when the Romans were defeated in Germany in the time of Augustus, there were portents both before and after which hinted at such a disaster. A temple of Mars was struck by lightning, locusts flew into the city and then were eaten by birds, the peaks of the Alps seemed to collapse into each other and send up three columns of fire, numerous comets were seen, bees formed their combs around altars in the camps, spears were seen coming from the north and heading towards the Roman camps, and a statue of Victory in Germany used to face Germany but was turned to face Rome (*Hist. Rom.* 56.24). He also mentions omens that appeared before Augustus's death, and these 'gave cause for some to say that this had not been a mere coincidence, but had been brought about by some divine purpose' (ἐκ δαίμονίου προβουλῆς ἐγένετο, 56.29).

In general, when faced with things that were paradoxical, especially in the natural world, it was common to think that a god was actively present. The rustling of the wind in leaves or grass, the sudden clap of thunder or flash of lightning, the unusual shape of a rock were often seen as signs of a god's presence. But there are also expressions of ambiguity about this integration. Are the gods involved in human affairs or not? Seneca had to face the questions that were obviously asked of him and other thinkers:

Are you so greatly ignorant that you believe the gods send in advance announcements of death and that everything on earth is so important that the universe is aware it is perishing? In other words, the basic question is whether human affairs are any concern to the gods (*Nat. Quaest.* 1.1.4).

He gives 'scientific reasons' to explain why lightning, thunder, comets, halos around the sun, and the rainbow occur. He divorces his opinion from those of the Etruscans who, he thinks, make the *deus* 'too unoccupied and the administrator of trivia if he arranges dreams for some people, entrails for others'. But at the same time he acknowledges that 'such things are carried out by divine agency' and that 'whatever happens, it is a sign of something that will happen' (*Nat. Quaest.* 2.32.2–4). Stoic that he is, Seneca in the end puts every thing down to fate (*fatum*), which he defines as 'the necessity of all events and actions which no force may break' (2.36.1).

People then, as now, fascinated by the paradoxical, had various and sometimes contradictory explanations for them. Speyer illustrates this in the case of priestesses who walked on coals. Varro, he says, offered two explanations: Some say it is because the priestess is filled with the deity; others say it is because she has rubbed her feet with salt first, and this prevents the fire from causing pain (1989: 352). Ambiguity can also be seen in the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius, who says he bought a collection of books in a Brundisium market that contained weird and wonderful reports of freaks of nature. He repeats some of them, and then he says that while he was writing them down, he 'was seized with disgust for such worthless writings which contribute nothing to the enrichment or profit of life'. Yet he goes on to quote Pliny, who wrote of freakish things that 'he (Pliny) knew to be true and had himself seen' (9.4). Again, Aulus Gellius later repeats some 'marvellous and false stories' reported by Pliny (10.12).

It would appear that there was a genre – now called paradoxography – which existed at least from the time of Herodotus. Ziegler (1949) thinks that there are some thirty-nine known paradoxographical texts. It is a genre in need of more research and critical analysis. But anyone wanting an example of a number of *paradoxa* collected in one text might read the opening chapter of Valerius Maximus's work, *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium* (written contemporaneously with Paul). It is full of anecdotes recounting such experiences from both Roman and Greek sources. The author makes little comment on or evaluation of them. However, over the centuries, some writers debated vigorously whether or not, for example, divine epiphanies actually occurred (for example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 2.68), and Aristotle denied that God communicated with humans in 'waking'